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ABSTRACT

In light of changing statistics about women in the labor force since 1960, the author discusses possible trends related to working women in the future. In 1962 the labor force participation rate of all U. S. women was 36% and of mothers, 34%. By 1975 these rates increased to 43% and 47% respectively. Unfortunately, women still seem to be taking low-paid jobs in traditionally female-oriented fields. The author hopes that future trends will show a much wider distribution of working women throughout the labor force. This will involve making fundamental changes in the way counselors, parents, and employers regard career possibilities for young women. Also, women who do work at home should be recognized for their economic contribution to the family's income, including a guaranteed fair share of Social Security and other benefits which normally come only with the husband's pay check. In addition, there should be more creative day care arrangements; training and certification for household workers; training and counseling for women criminal offenders; and work opportunities with support systems for welfare mothers. (AV)

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The Future of Working Women in The United States

There are two ways to look at the future of women in the work force. We can project from our present information what we think will be the picture. And we can speculate, hopefully, on the picture we would like to see.

The Women's Bureau does both of those things. Our Branch of Economic Status and Opportunities works with data as it becomes available from the Census, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, or other sources. They tell us about what is happening now, how it relates to what happened yesterday, and what it probably means for tomorrow. I want to talk about some of that information, and then to weave those facts into the kind of tapestry optimistic women would like to see describing their future in the United States.

We know, for instance, that one of the most striking changes in the US economy in the past 15 years has been the increasing strength of women's attachment to the labor force. "Extraordinary" is the word used frequently to describe the acceleration in the participation of women in the US work force. At the same time, as you know, that sharp acceleration the past 15 years has been accompanied by a good many other related happenings:

Five presidents ago, (1962), when John Kennedy appointed the President's Commission on the Status of Women, the labor force participation rate of all U.S. women was 36.7% -- of mothers, about 34%. There were some other pieces of herstorical trivia of which I might remind you:

No meeting had yet been presided over by a chairperson.

That essential new word hizzorher had not come into popular usage.

I for one, had never heard of either Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem.

They were still making jokes about that little difference.

Terms like displaced homemaker and re-entering woman were not in our lexicon.

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Since 1965, the net growth in the labor force due to women working has been nearly 60%, and the largest increase has been among young women. The present labor force participation rate of all women was 43.4 in 1975 and of mothers of children under 18 years, 47.4. For young women, 20 - 24 years old, it is more than 68%. We 've come quite a distance since the 1890's volume in the Labor Department entitled How to be Gainfully Employed Although A Woman was written.

For along with those figures has grown the use of such terms as nontraditional jobs, affirmative action, sex stereotyping and the common recognition of certain legislative accomplishment--Title IX, Title VII, Equal Credit-- and some not yet accomplished like the ERA.

But there are some other current facts to be taken into consideration before we move on to what lies ahead. The first is seemingly a paradoxical combination: --that more women are working, that most of them are working out of necessity, and that the earnings gap between women and men is growing wider.

That relates to another combination--women's jobs are traditionally low paid jobs, and yet, those are still the jobs most women are heading into.

If we put those facts together with our first projection, we have the beginning of the shape of the future. Well, one possible shape.

The current forecast tells us that 9 out of 10 young women under the age of 25 today will work for at least 25 years. What we would like to be able to add to that prediction is that all those young working women will have prepared themselves for such a variety of the jobs that were atypical for their mothers that they will be well distributed throughout the labor force.

We hope to see a future in which girls and young women will explore the possibilities and prepare for working lives, and will recognize that there are literally hundreds of jobs to which they can aspire, in addition to the 15 or so in which they now concentrate. Because even if they are among the half who are not working at any particular time-- if 9 out of 10 will work for a large chunk of their adult lives, 10 out of 10 will have to prepared.

High on our Women's Bureau list of accomplishable ideas for the future then, is a much wider distribution of working women throughout the labor force. One rather cataclysmic but not altogether unrealistic view of the road not too far ahead resembles a prognosis I once heard for Los Angeles transportation. It was made by an Irish urban expert from Boston, and this is what he said: "One morning at exactly 7:55 everyone in the LA area is going to back out of the driveway into the street at exactly the same minute--and then for a

hundred square miles, it will be like one big bowl of Jello. And nobody will be able to move!" The parallel in women's employment is predicted by those who look at the steadily increasing number of women in the labor force who go in and stay. They used to leave after they had babies, and stay out for a number of year. Now they stay. And one day, all those young women around the country are going to come out of high schools, jr. and community colleges, etcetera, and head into those same familiar women's jobs-- and there's going to be a big bowl of jello in the job market. At the Women's Bureau, we hope and are working to see that scenario is not the final one; that the term "women's jobs" will be obsolete, and that people will be preparing for jobs they like, are capable of doing, and from which they can earn at least an adequate living.

We know that this means that there will have to be some fundamental changes in the way counselors and parents and employers are educated to understand the probabilities that the young women in their charge will be working--and the range of job skills from which they will be free to choose.

There are some other changes we hope to see emerging in the future of The American Woman. In general, they are all related to such simple democratic concepts as fairness and choice.

We would like to see the woman who chooses to do her work at home recognized for her economic contribution. She needs to be guaranteed a fair share of the benefits, Social Security and others, that come with her husband's pay check. And if the marriage does not last, those same benefits need to be apportioned fairly. There are efforts being made in that direction, and our forecast is that the work of the woman in the home will be acknowledged in more concrete ways.

Futhermore, some thoughtful authorities anticipate that the continuing entry of young women into the marketplace will finally force more and more creative day care solution--perhaps as our older school age population declines, those empty schoolrooms and unemployed teachers may be used in public pre-schools. There will be subsidized neighbor hood home-based care for infants. The U.S. will no longer behind many other countries in its recognition of the problem of working mothers. Other changes which will help the families (and we do think the family will survive--the form may be changing, but it is not going to blow away) of working women, and the women themselves will be much wider use of flexitime and part time for both men and women.

And in the more equitable future which we are striking for, <u>household workers</u> will be trained, certified, and given opportunities to advance, so that their profession will be given both dignity and compensation adequate to support their own households, and to interest them in doing such very important jobs which can lead up a career ladder into institutional services of all kinds.

We also expect that the future will bring improved training and counseling for women offenders. Among some experts in this field, there is a strong feeling that since so many women are convicted of the so-called victimless crimes, many fewer of them should be incarcerated, and the chance for them to become employable is extremely important. One improvement, even in the current system, which we would prognosticate in an ideal future, would be training at least in job readiness, with accompanying work release opportunities.

I presume that in 20 years or so, we will have reduced the EEOC caseload, and that hiring of women from all racial and ethnic backgrounds will be based on the fairness which should have been governing all along. Employers will have learned that the myths about high turnover rate and limited behavioral expectations are false and obsolete, and women will be receiving on-the-job training and promotions equal to those received by their male co-workers.

Finally, many of us would like to project a future in which there are adequate varieties of work situations, combined with support systems which minimize the number of welfare mothers, which includes training, apprenticeships, placement in adequately paying jobs for all who want and need them, leaving on welfare only those who are truly unable to work. In short, our optimum view of the future of women and work in a nutshell is one in which opportunity and choice are the governing words, --and the Women's Bureau might finally have no real need to exist at all, except as an agency reporting success stories.

Mary Ann Wolfe
September 3, 1977